

Why the War Came *From Stories of the Revolution* by Collin G. Calloway @ nps.gov

The American colonists did not embrace independence easily. Most of them were of British ancestry. They spoke English and traded mainly with Britain and other British colonies. Most shared the mother country's Protestant religious tradition. The Americans' pride in being British reached a high point in 1763, with Britain's great victory in the Seven Years War (known in America as the French and Indian War).

That victory gained Britain what had been French Canada and all territory east of the Mississippi River, including Spanish Florida. Heavily in debt as a result of the war, Britain decided to keep an army in America to secure her new possessions and looked to the colonists to help pay for it. The British parliament approved new taxes on colonial imports and for the first time imposed a direct tax-the stamp tax (1765)-on the Americans. Colonial resistance to the new taxes only stiffened parliament's insistence on its right to govern the colonists "in all cases whatsoever."

Even after fighting began at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775, the Continental Congress petitioned King George III for redress and insisted that the colonists wanted to remain within the empire-but only as free men. The king responded by pronouncing the colonies to be in rebellion, and Congress decided it had no alternative to proclaiming independence.

On July 4, 1776, it declared that the "united colonies" were henceforth "free and independent states." Fulfilling this declaration, however, required a military victory over Britain.

Those Who Fought

America's revolution was both a civil war within British North America and, by 1778, part of a world war involving European powers. The British fought the war with an army of professional soldiers, lifetime recruits who were subject to strict military discipline. They also employed soldiers from German states and a large number of loyalists, American supporters of British rule who formed their own military units and fought against patriot forces.



The patriots, those who favored independence, developed their own Continental Army, which consisted initially of New England militiamen besieging the British in Boston and then of soldiers supplied by various colonies. They also relied on local militia units, whose members served for short terms, and partisan forces, especially in the South. The Marquis de Lafayette, Baron Friedrich W. A. von Steuben, and other European officers made significant contributions to the patriot cause. So, too, after 1778, did French soldiers and sailors, especially in the 1779 siege of British-held Savannah and in helping Washington's army trap Lord Cornwallis's large British force at Yorktown in 1781.

With an overall goal of slowing the advance of white settlement, American Indians were divided in their loyalties. Depending on local conditions, they joined the side they thought would favor their interests. Although Southerners opposed their use, some 5,000 African Americans fought side by side with whites for the patriot cause and their own freedom; tens of thousands more enslaved African Americans sought freedom with the British forces.

American Indians and the American Revolution

The Declaration of Independence accused King George III of unleashing "merciless Indian Savages" against innocent men, women, and children. The image of ferocious warriors propelled into action by a tyrannical monarch fixed in memory and imagination the Indians' role in the Revolution and justified their subsequent treatment. But many Indian nations tried to stay out of the conflict, some sided with the Americans, and those who fought with the British were not the king's pawns: they allied with the Crown as the best hope of protecting their homelands from the encroachments of American colonists and land speculators. The British government had afforded Indian lands a measure of protection by the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which had attempted to restrict colonial expansion beyond the Appalachian Mountains, and had alienated many American colonists. Indians knew that the Revolution was a contest for Indian land as well as for liberty.



Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant

Some Indian tribes went to war early. Cherokee warriors, frustrated by recurrent land losses, defied the authority of older chiefs and attacked frontier settlements, only to be soundly defeated by expeditions from Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas. On the other hand, Indians from the mission town at Stockbridge in western Massachusetts, like most New England Indians, supported their colonial neighbors. They volunteered as minutemen even before the outbreak of the fighting, joined Washington's army at the siege of Boston, and served in New York, New Jersey, and Canada.



The Revolution split the Iroquois Confederacy. Mohawks led by Joseph Brant adhered to their long-standing allegiance to the British, and eventually most Cayugas, Onondagas, and Senecas joined them. But Oneidas and Tuscaroras sided with the Americans, owing in large measure to the efforts of their Presbyterian missionary Samuel Kirkland. The Revolution became a civil war for the Iroquois, as Oneidas clashed with Senecas at the Battle of Oriskany in 1777. Iroquois sufferings were compounded in 1779 when General John Sullivan led an American army through their country, burning forty towns and destroying crops.

In the Ohio country Guyashuta of the Senecas, Cornstalk of the Shawnees, and White Eyes of the Delawares worked hard to steer a neutral course in the early years of the war. At the Treaty of Fort Pitt in 1778, Delawares and Americans pledged "perpetual peace and friendship." But after Americans killed White Eyes and Cornstalk, and slaughtered noncombatant Moravian Delawares at the mission town of Gnadenhutten, Ohio Indians made common cause with the British. They won victories in the West long after Cornwallis had surrendered in the East, and continued to resist American expansion for a dozen years after the Revolution.

In 1783, under the terms of the Peace of Paris, without regard to its Indian allies, Britain handed over to the new United States all its territory east of the Mississippi, south of the Great Lakes, and north of Florida. The United States proceeded to expand westward, acquiring Indian lands by treaty and by force. Stockbridges and Oneidas who had supported the Americans lost lands as well as Senecas and Shawnees who had fought against them.

Indians fought in the Revolution for Indian liberties and Indian homelands, not for the British empire. But the image of Indian participation presented in the Declaration of Independence prevailed: most Americans believed that Indians had backed monarchy and tyranny. A nation conceived in liberty need feel no remorse about dispossessing and expelling those who had fought against its birth.

African Americans in the Revolutionary Period

"How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?" Samuel Johnson, the great English writer and dictionary maker, posed this question in 1775. He was among the first, but certainly not the last, to contrast the noble aims of the American Revolution with the presence of 450,000 enslaved African Americans in the 13 colonies. Slavery was practiced in every colony in 1775, but it was crucial to the economy and social structure from the Chesapeake region south to Georgia. Slave labor produced the great export crops of the South—tobacco, rice, indigo, and naval stores. Bringing slaves from Africa and the West Indies had made settlement of the New World possible and highly profitable. Who could predict what breaking away from the British Empire might mean for black people in America?

The British governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, quickly saw the vulnerability of the South's slaveholders. In November 1775, he issued a proclamation promising freedom to any slave of a rebel who could make it to the British lines. Dunmore organized an "Ethiopian" brigade of about 300 African Americans, who saw action at the Battle of Great Bridge (December 9, 1775). Dunmore and the British were soon expelled from Virginia, but the prospect of armed former slaves fighting alongside the British must have struck fear into plantation masters across the South.

African Americans in New England rallied to the patriot cause and were part of the militia forces that were organized into the new Continental Army. Approximately 5 percent of the American soldiers at the Battle of Bunker Hill (June 17, 1775) were black. New England blacks mostly served in integrated units and received the same pay as whites, although no African American is known to have held a rank higher than corporal.

It has been estimated that at least 5,000 black soldiers fought on the patriot side during the Revolutionary War. The exact number will never be known because eighteenth century muster rolls usually did not indicate race. Careful comparisons between muster rolls and church, census, and other records have recently helped identify many black soldiers. Additionally, various eyewitness accounts provide some indication of the level of African Americans' participation during the war. Baron von Closen, a member of Rochambeau's French army at Yorktown, wrote in July 1781, "A quarter of them [the American army] are Negroes, merry, confident and sturdy."

The use of African Americans as soldiers, whether freemen or slaves, was avoided by Congress and General Washington early in the war. The prospect of armed slave revolts proved more threatening to white society than British redcoats. General Washington allowed the enlistment of free blacks with "prior military experience" in January 1776, and extended the enlistment terms to all free blacks in January 1777 in order to help fill the depleted ranks of the Continental Army. Because the states constantly failed to meet their quotas

of manpower for the army, Congress authorized the enlistment of all blacks, free and slave, in 1777. Of the southern states, only Maryland permitted African Americans to enlist. In 1779, Congress offered slave masters in South Carolina and Georgia \$1,000 for each slave they provided to the army, but the legislatures of both states refused the offer. Thus, the greatest number of African American soldiers in the American army came from the North.

Although most Continental regiments were integrated, a notable exception was the elite First Rhode Island. Mustered into service in July 1778, the First Rhode Island numbered 197 black enlisted men commanded by white officers. Baron von Cloisen described the regiment as "the most neatly dressed, the best under arms, and the most precise in its maneuvers." The regiment received its baptism of fire at the battle of Rhode Island (Newport) on August 29, 1778, successfully defeating three assaults by veteran Hessian troops. At the siege of Yorktown, on the night of October 14, 1781, the regiment's light company participated in the assault and capture of Redoubt 10. On June 13, 1783, the regiment was disbanded, receiving high praise for its service. Another notable black unit, recruited in the French colony of St. Domingue (present-day Haiti), fought with the French and patriots at the Battle of Savannah (October 9, 1779).

When the British launched their southern campaign in 1780, one of their aims was to scare Americans back to the crown by raising the fear of massive slave revolts. The British encouraged slaves to flee to their strongholds, promising ultimate freedom. The strategy backfired, as slave owners rallied to the patriot cause as the best way to maintain order and the plantation system. Tens of thousands of African Americans sought refuge with the British, but fewer than 1,000 served as soldiers. The British made heavy use of the escapees as teamsters, cooks, nurses, and laborers. At the war's conclusion, some 20,000 blacks left with the British, preferring an uncertain future elsewhere to a return to their old masters. American blacks ended up in Canada, Britain, the West Indies, and Europe. Some were sold back into slavery. In 1792, 1,200 black loyalists who had settled in Nova Scotia left for Sierra Leone, a colony on the west coast of Africa established by Britain specifically for former slaves.

The Revolution brought change for some American blacks, although nothing approaching full equality. The courageous military service of African Americans and the revolutionary spirit ended slavery in New England almost immediately. The middle states of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey adopted policies of gradual emancipation from 1780 to 1804. Many of the founders opposed slavery in principle (including some whose wealth was largely in human property). Individual manumissions increased following the Revolution. Still, free blacks in both the North and South faced persistent discrimination in virtually every aspect of life, notably employment, housing, and education. Many of the founders hoped that slavery would eventually disappear in the American South. When cotton became king in the South after 1800, this hope died. There was just too much profit to be made working slaves on cotton plantations. The statement of human equality in the Declaration of Independence was never entirely forgotten, however. It remained as an ideal that could be appealed to by civil rights activists through the following decades.

Salem Poor: "A Brave and Gallant Soldier"

In the Massachusetts State Archives is a petition to the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, stating that in the "late Battle at Charlestown," a man from Colonel Frye's Regiment "behaved like an experienced officer" and that in this man "centers a brave and gallant soldier." This document, dated December of 1775, just six months after



the Battle of Bunker Hill, is signed by fourteen officers who were present at the battle, including Colonel William Prescott. Of the 2,400 to 4,000 colonists who participated in the battle, no other man is singled out in this manner.

This hero of the Battle of Bunker Hill is Salem Poor of Andover, Massachusetts. Although documents show that Poor, along with his regiment and two others, were sent to Bunker Hill to build a fort and other fortifications on the night of June 16, 1775, we have no details about just what Poor did to earn the praise of these officers. The petition simply states "to set forth the particulars of his conduct would be tedious." Perhaps his heroic deeds were too many to mention.

Few details of this hero's life are available to us. Born a slave in the late 1740s, Poor managed to buy his freedom in 1769 for 27 pounds, which represented a year's salary for the typical working man. He married Nancy, a free African-American woman, and they had a son. Salem Poor left his wife and child behind in May 1775 and fought for the patriot cause at Bunker Hill, Saratoga, and Monmouth. We can only speculate about the motives for Poor's sacrifice: was it patriotism, a search for new experience, or the prospect of a new and better life? The Battle of Bunker Hill was a daring and provocative act against established authority; all who participated could well have been hanged for treason. Shut out from many opportunities in colonial society, Salem Poor chose to fight for an independent nation. In the words of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the bravery of Poor and other African-American soldiers "has a peculiar beauty and merit."

Women in the American Revolution

During the American Revolution, many women joined the war. They played a variety of important roles. Since women frequently did not handle artillery, their names were not usually listed in records. Some of the famous camp followers were Molly Pitcher, Margaret Cochran Corbin, and Martha Washington.

"I ask no favors for my sex, I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks, and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God has designed us to occupy."

– Sarah Grimke, an influential writer during the Revolution

Women played numerous roles during the war. Aside from doing household chores, women acted as messengers and soldiers. They worked as:

- Camp followers
- Soldiers
- Messengers
- Manufacturers
- Writers

Camp Followers

Women who followed the Continental Army during the war were known as camp followers. They were not paid for their services; rather, they received partial rations. Some of the duties of camp followers were cooking, nursing, washing and mending clothes, and setting up the camp.

Soldiers

Women were not officially enlisted in the army, though they sometimes assisted their husbands in battle or even joined the army disguised as men. For instance, Margaret Cochran Corbin fought in the battle at Fort

Washington. Similarly, Molly Pitcher assisted artillerymen and supplied water to the troops, while Deborah Sampson impersonated a man and joined the American army.

Messengers

Women acted as messengers and warned the local militia of British plans. For instance, Lydia Darragh overheard plans to attack the Continental forces at Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania and warned General Washington's troops about it.

Manufacturers

Women in the war gathered to weave cloth for uniforms, knit socks, and collect support funds. Esther De Berdt Reed raised funds to purchase linen, while some women, like Angelica Vrooman, made and repaired guns.

Writers

Women such as Phillis Wheatley and Mercy Otis Warren influenced society through their writing. Mercy Otis Warren chronicled the events of the war and published it in three volumes, entitled *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. Similarly, Phillis Wheatley wrote poetry on the war and slavery.